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ABSTRACT

The major purposes of this investigation were (1) to contribute to existing research on the preschool child's comprehension of disclaimers in television commercials, (2) to identify specific standard or modified disclaimers that are understood by preschoolers, and (3) to determine logical relationships between study variables. Disclaimers were defined as aural and/or visual displays designed to delineate an advertised item's actual performance and to dispel misconceptions that might be created by demonstration of a product (e.g., "batteries not included"). To investigate several research questions focused on preschool children's comprehension of disclaimers, a sample of 36 boys and 39 girls was randomly selected from a population of 4- and 5-year-olds. Subjects represented a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and were enrolled in several types of nursery schools, preschools, and kindergartens. Data on age, sex, and school were collected along with scores on measures of receptive language/verbal intelligence, general knowledge of television advertising, ability to understand and explain disclaimers in subject's own words, and comprehension of commonly used and simplified disclaimers. Measures dealing directly with disclaimer comprehension were developed. Results indicated that linguistic ability was a poor predictor of paraphrase and standard/modified disclaimer scores. Scores reflecting general knowledge about television were the most effective predictors of disclaimer comprehension. (RH)

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The Preschool Child's Comprehension of Television Commercial Disclaimers

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Paper presented at the Research Forum of the annual Study Conference of the Association for Childhood Education International

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THE PRESCHOOL CHILD'S COMPREHENSION OF TELEVISION COMMERCIAL DISCLAIMERS

The typical American child will be exposed to 250,000 television commercials by age 10, yet little is known about children's comprehension of commercials or what influence these understandings might exert on consumer behavior. Although both programming and commercials televised during weekend mornings have often been the focus of research efforts (Barcus, 1975), it is estimated that 90% of children's viewing occurs outside the Saturday and Sunday morning time slots (Choate, 1975). The two most prevalent types of television advertising directed toward children are commercials for cereal and toys, but a substantial portion of the more than 22,000 commercials a child watches each year are apt to be directed expressly at adult consumers. Relevant to both advertising for childrens' and adults' products, then, is the issue of how young audiences interpret televised commercial messages.

Three Theories of Comprehension

Research related to the issue of whether or not children can comprehend the intent of advertising can be subsumed under three major categories, (1) social learning theory, (2) attribution theory, or (3) cognitive-developmental theory (Faber, Perloff & Hawkins, 1982). The studies under the first classification, social learning, tend to emphasize a consumer's personal experience with products and the influence of interactions with peers, siblings and parents. Reid (1979a) exemplified this orientation when he concluded that a child's level of understanding of an advertised product is a function of family group interaction related both to the child's consumer skills and to the previous social experiences that a child brings to the viewing environment. Studies classified here under attribution theory, on the other hand, stress specific, measurable variables of the viewer, the situation, and the stimulus such as amount of time

spent viewing television, socioeconomic status of parents, or the presence/absence of a premium offer. An example of this approach is a study of influences on the preschool child's visual attention (Alwitt et al., 1980) which examined thirty-seven different visual and auditory attributes.

The third theoretical orientation, cognitive-developmental, links the child's understanding of advertising motives to the attainment of logical operations. According to Piagetian theory, young children (1) fail to differentiate between fantasy and reality, (2) tend to focus on one aspect of a situation to the exclusion of all others, (3) are seldom capable of identifying separate stages in the sequence of a transformation, (4) are unable to conceptualize that certain events or actions are reversible, (5) find it difficult to take another person's perspective and (6) often incorrectly conclude that when two unrelated events occur simultaneously, one has caused the other. Numerous studies (Blatt et al., 1971; Leifer et al., 1974; Sheikh & Moleski, 1977) have substantiated the contention that the limited logic of the young child is a poor match for what Singer and Singer (1981) have labeled the "ubiquitous medium" of television. In a study by Quarforth (1970), for instance, kindergarten children found the task of sorting pictures as human, animated or puppet to be extremely challenging and many children expressed the belief that the characters somehow got inside of their television sets. Even second and third graders who could accurately group the pictures did not understand the relationship between cartoons and a series of drawings. Without question, there is considerable evidence to support the contention that children, particularly preschoolers, are apt to be confused or misled by what they see on television.

Preschooler's Comprehension

Irrespective of which of these three theories underlies a particular research project, however, the viewer's age is such a significant influence that it tends to be confounded with other variables (Faber, Perloff & Hawkins, 1982). In fact, where the effects of television advertising are concerned the analysis of data by broad age categories of subjects was one major concern expressed in a comprehensive review of the research literature:

> Existing research clearly establishes that children become more skilled in evaluating television advertising as they grow older, and to treat all children from 2 to 12 as a homogeneous group masks important, perhaps crucial differences. These findings suggest that both researchers and policymakers give greater attention to the problems of younger viewers, since they appear to be the most vulnerable (Adler et al., 1975, p. v).

The importance of intellectual development - or its counterpart, chronological age - has been a recurrent theme in television research recommendations. Preschoolers consistently emerge as the group that is least likely to correctly interpret advertising motives, and the most likely to be convinced of the accuracy of whatever they see on television. Perhaps the most comprehensive approach to the study of preschooler's understanding of television commercials would incorporate all three of the different influences on comprehension identified by Husson (1982). These influences were: (1) characteristics of the television stimulus, (2) the child's level of cognitive development and (3) the nature of the viewing environment. Particularly pertinent to the study of a young child's comprehension of television advertising information is the child's understanding of a special type of message, the television commercial disclaimer.

The Preschool Child's Disclaimer Comprehension

In terms of television advertising, one important variable affecting the child's perception of an advertised product's features and function is his/her comprehension of disclaimers (cf. Liebert, Sprafkin & Davidson, 1982). Disclaimers can be defined as aural and/or visual displays designed to delineate the advertised item's actual performance and to dispel misconceptions that might have been created by a demonstration of the product (e.g., "batteries not included", "accessories sold separately"). Clearly, a disclaimer can contribute to the young consumer's knowledge only when it is successful in conveying the intended message. Comprehension of television commercial disclaimers may present a particular problem for the preschool child, who is at a distinct disadvantage, both linguistically and experientially. Several studies have concluded that visual attention alone is a poor predictor of the young child's comprehension of televised commercial messages (Susman, 1978; Lorch, Anderson & Levin, 1979; Alwitt et al., 1980; Anderson et al., 1981). Apparently, even though comprehension is related to attention, understanding is more complex than the simple act of watching. Even though Atkins (1975) found that an audio-visual disclaimer, (rather than an audio only disclaimer) is a more effective way of communicating information to children, many questions remain concerning the child's ability to correctly interpret disclaimers. Liebert and others (1977) studied the influence of simplifications in the wording of a commonly used disclaimer by converting "some assembly required" to "you have to put it together". Use of the modified disclaimer substantially increased children's comprehension of the disclaimer, but this research team had also discovered that older children, based upon experience, anticipated that some toys would have to be assembled, even without hearing a disclaimer. There are obviously several other

disclaimers in use that should be investigated, particularly in terms of the preschool child's comprehension. The major purposes of this investigation were (1) to contribute to existing research on the preschool child's comprehension of disclaimers, (2) to identify specific standard or modified disclaimers that are understood by preschoolers, and (3) to determine logical relationships among the study variables.

Because young children constitute a "high risk" consumer group where misinterpretation of advertising is concerned and because disclaimers are such an essential component of commercial message comprehension, the following research questions were raised:

1. What is the relationship between linguistic competence and television commercial disclaimer comprehension?
2. Can a measure of the child's receptive language be an effective predictor of disclaimer comprehension?
3. How is the preschooler's comprehension affected by simplifications in the wordings of disclaimers? For example, will a modified disclaimer ("you have to buy your own batteries") significantly improve a child's comprehension over a standard disclaimer ("batteries not included")?
4. How might a measure of consumer socialization experiences relate to the preschooler's comprehension of both standard and modified disclaimers?
5. Can scores on a general knowledge of television interview scale be used to predict disclaimer comprehension?

Subjects

A pilot study was conducted with twenty preschool children. All participants in the preliminary study were enrolled as kindergarten students in the local University School and parental permission had been granted for them to participate. Although this sample of children may not be representative of the general population of preschoolers, the primary purpose of the pilot was to obtain an initial estimate of inter-rater reliability, so potential bias in the pilot study sample was not regarded as a serious flaw.

Children from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds were identified as the population for the major study. They were four and five year olds enrolled in a public school kindergarten, a Head Start program, a Montessori school or a church-affiliated nursery school in Western Pennsylvania. A letter explaining the purposes of the project, the child's role as a study subject and a parental permission slip were sent home to parents. The return rate was acceptable (82%). A sample of 75 subjects was then randomly selected from the population described above. A total of 36 boys and 39 girls participated in the major study. The two graduate students responsible for interviewing all study subjects attended a training session during which a videotape of preschool children's actual responses to the various measures were scored. Inter-rater reliabilities for the pilot and major studies were determined by having each research assistant interview half of the study group in person and rate the other half of the group by viewing videotapes. In this way, every child in the pilot study and a subsample of subjects in the major study (N=25) were scored by both interviewers. Inter-rater reliability estimates were high and positive (.83-.97) on the measures of disclaimer comprehension.

Measures and Descriptive Data

In addition to the three descriptor variables of age, sex and school, scores on four other measures were obtained. Each of the tests was individually administered in consideration of the preschool child's special assessment needs and a variety of response formats was provided.

	NAME OF INSTRUMENT	PURPOSE OF MEASUREMENT	
1.	Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (1981)	receptive language/ verbal intelligence	PPVT
2.	Personal Interview Questionnaire -(adapted from Blatt, et al., 1971; Ward, 1972)	the child's general knowledge of television advertising	GK
3.	Disclaimer - paraphrase items	child's ability to understand and explain disclaimers in his or her own words	DP
4.	Standard disclaimer comprehension Modified disclaimer comprehension - a structured interview using pictorial multiple choice items	child's comprehension of commonly used disclaimers ("some assembly required") child's comprehension of simplified disclaimers ("you have to put it together")	SD/ MD

The two test variables (DP, SD/MD) that dealt directly with disclaimer comprehension were developed for the purposes of this investigation and piloted prior to the major study with a sample of 5 year olds (N=20).

It was hypothesized that verbal intelligence, general knowledge of television commercials and comprehension of specific disclaimers would be interrelated and that these four measures would be related to subjects' maturity. One might argue, of course, that the consumer socialization experiences a child brings to the testing would be another important influence. Work done previously (Blatt, et al., 1971; and Ward, (1972) on The Personal Interview Questionnaire suggested that it was an adequate indicator of children's general knowledge about television, hence it could reflect some of the child's previous experiences with television generally speaking and advertising in particular. The interview contains questions such as: What is a television program? What is a television commercial? What is the difference between a television program and a commercial? What does a television commercial try to do? and Do television commercials always tell the truth? Why or why not? Responses to these questions were recorded and then rated on a five point scale (0-4). One preschooler who was

asked, for example, "What do television commercials try to do?" replied "They try to make you spend your money". This answer was scored as a 4, the highest value on the scale because it demonstrated some insight into the motives of advertising. If a child said nothing or simply said he/she did "didn't know", it was scored as a zero. Responses that described commercials accurately, yet failed to identify advertising's intent such as "commercials tell you about things" were scored as a 2 or 3, depending upon responses to a probing question that was a restatement of the original, e.g. "Well, that's true, commercials do tell us about things. What else do commercials try to do?"

For the disclaimer paraphrase items (DP), subjects were simply asked to explain what each of seven different phrases meant in their own words, and answers were scored as previously described on a five point scale. Table I below summarizes these findings.

TABLE I

PARAPHRASE ITEM	No Response (0)	Poor/ fair (1-2)	Good/ Excellent (3-4)
1. take only as directed	34.7	25.4	40.0
2. void where prohibited	69.3	28.0	2.7
3. batteries not included	17.3	40.0	36.0
4. comes complete with everything you see here	30.7	22.6	42.6
5. part of a nutritious breakfast	24.0	33.4	42.6
6. free inside specially marked packages	26.7	33.3	40.0
7. money refunded if not completely satisfied	50.7	33.3	16.0

Evidently, preschoolers are much more familiar with some disclaimers than others. Of course, there were no visual stimuli to accompany the auditory stimulus and other research studies have suggested that visual stimuli are generally more effective in attracting and maintaining young children's attention. If the comprehension of the language of disclaimers is the focal point, however, an audio-only approach is warranted. Because disclaimers are primarily a receptive language stimulus, children may effectively ignore them until social learning or experience intervenes and sensitizes them to the importance of these messages. For example, a poison prevention program in school could alert children of the meaning of "take only as directed" or the disappointment over a mechanized toy without a power source may influence the child's receptiveness to a statement about battery-operated items.

Based upon previous study of the effects on comprehension of linguistic simplifications in disclaimers (Liebert et al., 1971), a multiple choice picture inventory for both standard and modified disclaimers was devised and piloted in the preliminary study. After two practice items were completed, the interviewer would say, for example "Pretend that you are watching television and it says "Cowboy Bob's accessories sold separately". Now which picture shows what you get when you buy just a Cowboy Bob doll?" Children were presented with three picture choices, a doll only, a doll with many accessories (clothes, horse, etc.) or a nonsense picture. The findings from this portion of the study are summarized in Table II.

TABLE II

	DISCLAIMERS	incorrect	correct	
1.	STANDARD			
	"some assembly required"	40	35	
	MODIFIED			*
	"you have to put it together"	18	57	
2.	STANDARD			
	"accessories sold separately"	29	46	
	MODIFIED			
	"if you want _____'s clothes, you have to buy them"	41	34	
3.	STANDARD			
	"batteries not included"	41	34	
	MODIFIED			*
	"you have to buy your own batteries"	11	64	
4.	STANDARD			
	"free inside specially marked packages"	30	45	
	MODIFIED			
	"just look for the picture of _____ on the package"	61	14	
5.	STANDARD			
	"part of a nutritious breakfast"	14	61	
	MODIFIED			
	"a good breakfast has other foods, not just cereal"	7	68	

Modifications of the two standard disclaimers "accessories sold separately" and "free inside specially marked packages" actually correlated negatively with the total score so that when a t- test was applied to determine the significance of the difference between the two means, no significant difference was found. This may be attributable to flaws in the instrument itself or, it may be regarded as an indication that children have already "cued into" certain disclaimers that have special significance for them. The word free, for instance, may have such a powerful connotation for children who are accustomed to cereal box premiums that the concept of whether or not an item is pictured on the package is a less powerful stimulus.

Major Findings

As noted earlier, mere attention is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for comprehension. Evidently, the same holds true for linguistic ability, because performance on the PPVT (1981) was a poor predictor of both paraphrase and standard/modified disclaimer scores even though the test is generally regarded as a measure of receptive language. It had been originally hypothesized that a multiple regression equation which used age, sex, PPVT score and score on the general knowledge measure as independent variables could be used to predict the dependent variable of disclaimer comprehension as measured both by the paraphrase and standard/modified multiple choice test. The most effective predictor of disclaimer comprehension, however, was The Personal Interview Questionnaire (Blatt et al., 1971; Ward, 1972) which assesses general knowledge about television. Both a product-moment correlation and a canonical correlation showed a marked association between scores on the measure of general knowledge of television and scores on the paraphrase items (r=.80). These findings were a rather dramatic departure from the relationships among the variables that were

originally hypothesized. Even though a child may be linguistically precocious and even when the language of a disclaimer is simplified to facilitate comprehension, television commercial messages with no personal relevance simply may be disregarded and disclaimers in any form may lack effectiveness until experience intervenes and attaches importance to the phrase.

Implications

Many studies have concluded that as young children accumulate experiences with advertising, they tend to become more skeptical of advertising claims and recognize that the intent of commercials is to sell a product (c.f., Adler, 1980). Although chronological age is usually the variable associated with such research, a better construct might be "advertising savvy", which could be a composite of the child's general knowledge of television commercials, ability to paraphrase specific messages (such as disclaimers), and interview data collected from the child's parents and teachers. This fusion of cognitive-developmental theory, attribution theory, and social learning theory seems to be the most viable direction for future research on the effects of television advertising on children.

As Quisenberry (1982) observed in a recent review of the literature on the influence of televised commercial messages on children: (1) advertising is successful in boosting product sales; (2) commercials can supply information and structures which are related to a language learning; (3) parents and teachers should learn to use television as an educational resource; and (4) the child's response to advertising is affected by the viewing environment, particularly the value structures of significant others with whom the child interacts. Although consumer advocacy groups, most notably Action for Children's Television have

called for a ban on advertising directed toward children (Turk, 1979), even if this goal could be achieved, children would continue to be affected by advertising directed at adult audiences.

Clearly, the best mediator of the potentially puzzling or adverse effects of advertising on young children is meaningful interaction with more experienced consumers, particularly parents (Browne, 1978; Messaris & Sarett, 1981; Ward, Wackman & Wartella, 1977). In a study of parental mediation of television advertising's influences, Robertson (1979) concluded:

> Children's requests provide an opportunity for parental socialization and training regarding consumption, but this focus has not been pursued in the literature. It would seem, for example, that parents' verbal responses to children's requests would help to teach the child about the realities of the market place - whether explicitly or implicitly . . . The results of television viewed by children - requests for purchases - are eventually handled by the parents. By the same token, parents are also instrumental in the socialization of the child and the values brought to TV viewing. The impact of advertising is a function of a complex set of family, child and situational factors (pp. 23-24).

When families establish viewing rules (Reed, 1979b) and discussion of commercial messages take place, young children become more resistant to deceptive advertising (Haefner et al., 1975) and even develop more desirable attitudes toward medicines advertised on television (Robertson, Rossiter & Gleason, 1980). Because the preschool child's comprehension of television commercial disclaimers constitute an essential component of consumer socialization, it may be particularly important for parents to educate young children about the meaning of these commercial messages. Family discussions about advertising, generally speaking, or even a particular commercial may not provide young consumers with sufficient explanation about the meaning of those phrases that could have a significant impact on children's lives. A child's inability to understand a disclaimer could result in a relatively minor disappointment, such as discovering that a cereal box does not contain the premium offer because it is not "specially marked". It could also have much more serious ramifications, such as

a child believing that if one pill is good, many would be better because he/she attaches no meaning to the disclaimer "take only as directed". Further research, both into the effectiveness of specific disclaimers and into the apparent relationship between disclaimer comprehension and parental mediation strategies is indicated if the goal of truth in advertising is to be realized.

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